Marcos receives a stinging setback

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When he called last week's National Assembly elections in the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos calculated that victory by a few opposition candidates would give his regime a veneer of democratic respectability. But as the results trickled in, it became obvious that the 66-year-old dictator had miscalculated. Roughly 80 per cent of the electorate cast ballots, and unofficial returns showed the opposition leading in races for 63 of the 183 seats at stake, with independents ahead in 22 others. In contrast, Marcos's New Society Movement (KBL) was winning in only 98 races and might have performed even worse if its followers had not resorted to widespread voting fraud. The standings at dissolution of the assembly: 187 KBL members and 13 opposition members.

The opposition's strong showing surprised its leaders. The results, said Salvador Laurel, the 54-year-old head of a 12-party coalition of opposition groups called the United Nationalist Demo-

cratic Organization (UNIDO), were "beyond our hopes and wildest imagination."

Still, Marcos himself was not in any immediate danger of losing his grip on power—or the presidency. For one thing, the country's constitution allows

him to fill 17 positions in the 200-seat legislature by appointment—more than enough to ensure a continued majority for KBL members. For another, Marcos retains the power to dissolve the assembly at any time and rule by decree. But most Western analysts hailed last week's results as an unusually significant expression of the popular will, compared with earlier elections. They also described it as a frank expression of nonconfidence in Marcos's 18year-old regime. "It's a good lesson," said one

U.S. diplomat in Manila. "And I hope it has been learned."

Indeed, the outcome was remarkable in light of the efforts that Marcos's followers made to rig the election. Throughout the 45-day campaign party activists wooed voters with hastily ar-

ranged land reform proposals and pledges of development projects. More open attempts at bribery involved the distribution of cash in plain white envelopes, known as "guidelines," to local officials who agreed to use their influence on behalf of the KBL. Meanwhile, the government kept a tight rein on the media, at one point cancelling a phone-in television show that was to have featured José Diokno, a popular leader of an opposition faction that urged a boycott at the elections. Instead, viewers were treated to blank television screens for 20 minutes. By election day the pro-Marcos forces had abandoned any pretense of fairness. In San Miguel, two hours' drive north of the capital, opposition candidate José Yap, for one, filed a protest after officers from the civilian home defence forces went from house to house armed with M-16 rifles, threatening people who failed to show enthusiasm for the KBL. "You cannot blame them, they are barrio people," said Yap, referring to voters who succumbed to the officers' tactics. "These soldiers are assigned here to protect these people. How can they disobey their orders?" Reports from other regions indicated that intimidation was widespread. In Mirawi City, on the southern island of Mindanao, a pro-administration strongman in the largely Moslem area staged a military parade, ostensibly a "caravan for peace," to promote KBL candidates. "I didn't like seeing that," said one diplomat. "It's still martial law down there." In all, the military said, 121 people died in election violence, many in clashes between security forces and what the government referred to as "communist rebels" attempting to disrupt the voting. In Manila a UNIDO campaign aide was found dead with a bullet between his eyes and his hands tied behind his back. Party officials said the aide, Ernesto Cionelo, had defied warnings by "armed goons" not to work on election day.

Elsewhere, Marcos's supporters resorted to ballot stuffing. In one precinct in central Manila, vote counting was already under way when several men burst into the room and replaced a stack of ballots with forms made out for the KBL candidate, Ronaldo Zamora. "Of course, yes, I was frightened," said Ruby Mayugba, an elementary school teacher assigned to help count the votes. The episode was later reported to the National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), an independent watchdog body, whose officials sent observers and corrected the problem. In another instance, a NAMFREL observer, Baltizar Endriga, said he saw at least 10 voters go from precinct to precinct casting ballots for the government candidate. Said Endrigo: "I complained, but they just went ahead." Voting officials daubed what they claimed was indelible ink on voters' fingers at each polling station in an effort to prevent such abuses. But the ink could be easily removed with soap and water or, in some cases, rubbing alcohol.

Still, most analysts agreed that the polling was relatively orderly compared to past Filipino elections. "I think our presence in the precincts helped to make the elections more honest," said NAMFREL chairman José Concepcion, a

wealthy businessman from Manila. But even Concepcion insisted that if voting security had been truly effective, “The borderline races would have gone to the opposition” rather than to the KBL.

In one race KBL candidate Ruperto Gaite ran against former beauty queen Aurora Pijuan-Manotoc, also known by

her nickname Au-Au, in the Manila financial district of Makati. The willowy Manotoc is a particular irritant to the ruling regime because her former husband, Tommy, is now married to Marcos’s daughter, Imee, who was herself elected to the assembly from the family’s home province, llocos Norte. Early returns in Makati showed Gaite and Manotoc locked in a seesaw race, but the

balance tilted sharply in favor of Gaite after results arrived from 166 precincts in which NAMFREL had no observers. Claimed Manotoc: “They [government officials] are doing everything in their power to cheat.”

As the counting continued, Laurel instructed UNIDO supporters to watch the process “like hawks” and to apprehend, using force if necessary, any official caught cheating. Added Laurel: “We realize this is fraught with danger, but we have no choice but to protect our votes.” Some opposition spokesmen accused the government’s Commission on Elections of deliberately delaying the counting in order to allow Marcos or the military to tamper with the results. Indeed, at least one prominent opposition figure—Agapito (Butz) Aquino, the younger brother of murdered opposition leader Benigno Aquino—refused to join in the celebrations over the preliminary returns. “I have full confidence in the cheating ability of Marcos,” he said. “Let us wait for the official result.” Aquino himself supported the movement to boycott the elections.

At week’s end it was still unclear what effect the opposition’s newfound strength will have on Filipino politics. During the campaign Laurel vowed repeatedly that UNIDO would move to impeach Marcos. But there is virtually no chance that it could get the two-thirds majority needed to approve an impeachment motion. Still, the opposition’s surprising show of strength—including the defeat of two senior cabinet members, solicitor general Estolito Mendoza and agriculture minister Arturo Tanco—raised optimism among its members that it might overcome the divisions that in the past have prevented it from offering a real challenge to Marcos.

But the election contained at least one important consolation for Marcos. Ever since the August, 1983, assassination of Aquino upon his return to Manila from three years of voluntary exile in the United States, the Filipino dictator has been under attack at home and abroad over his repressive leadership. U.S. officials, in particular, have expressed concern that frustration would push the moderate opposition toward an alliance with the communist New People’s Army, a 7,000-strong guerrilla force which is active in every province of the archipelago. Now Marcos can point to his opponents’ electoral success and claim that the Philippines is on the road to genuine democracy. That, in turn, may help him gain more foreign aid from the United States, and, as a result, last

week's election victories by the opposition may help to prolong the regime of the man many Filipinos want to depose.

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